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ABSTRACT

Today, many communities are expanding the roles of their schools and school buildings. This development is reversing a trend dominant for several decades, which has alienated the school from much of the community. This report focuses on community uses for local schools--how the role of the schoolhouse has changed over time and how four medium-size cities are currently returning the schoolhouse to the center of public life. The Pew Partnership for Civic Change recently asked over 100 cities with populations between 50,000 and 100,00 to describe their own successful civic collaborations. The following four projects are described: (1) centralizing family social services in three elementary schools in Charleston, West Virginia; (2) revitalizing the neighborhood in Utica, New York; (3) creating portable youth program centers in Visalia, California; and (4) establishing supplemental programs for middle-school students in Waco, Texas. Conclusions are that community use of school facilities can build neighborhood cohesion, positive community-school relations, and improved family-teacher relationships. (LMI)

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SPRING 1994

Why Lock the Doors at Three O'Clock?: *Innovative Community Uses for the Neighborhood School*

The local schoolhouse is enjoying a renaissance of sorts. Today, many communities are expanding the role of their schools and school buildings. Some cities are encouraging outside groups to use school facilities after-hours, while other communities are developing new uses for vacant schoolhouses as a way of revitalizing failing neighborhoods. In the process, these cities and towns are restoring the schoolhouse to the center of American community life. These late developments are reversing a trend, dominant for several decades, that has alienated the school from much of the community. This increasing separation is, in itself, a marked departure from what has been the traditional relationship between schools and the community. Up until the middle of this century, a neighborhood would use its local schools frequently, for any number of public events. This was especially true in rural farming areas, where the school was often the only public building for miles around. In fact, in many rural districts the school building also served as church, social center, and concert hall. Today, the schoolhouse plays a much more limited role in most communities. Over the course of this century, changing mores moved the schoolhouse away from the center of our shared public life.

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There are, however, ongoing efforts to strengthen the relationship between schools and communities. The Pew Partnership for Civic Change recently asked over one hundred American cities with populations between 50,000 and 150,000 to describe their own successful civic collaborations. Many of the responding cities described community projects that use school facilities. Most of these collaborations are grassroots initiatives that make use of what is, in fact, an important community resource: the local school. Some cities are encouraging community groups to use school facilities in the evenings, while other cities are giving new life to vacant school buildings. Communities are now using schools after-hours as family support centers, as social service distribution points, and as program centers for at-risk youth. This report focuses on community uses for local schools: how the role of the schoolhouse has changed over time, and how four medium-size cities are currently bringing the schoolhouse back to the center of our shared public life.

Community Gathering Places—Past and Present

Community use of the local schoolhouse is not a new idea. Along with churches and public parks, the schoolhouse has been a traditional gathering place in America. A century ago our nation was, to a great extent, composed of small farming communities in which the schoolhouse was one of the most important—if not the only—public edifice. Andrew Gulliford's *America's Country Schools* details the ways in which these rural communities used their school buildings:

. . . the schoolhouse was the social center of the community. The more remote the area, the more important the school. All groups met there—the wheat growers association, 4H clubs and homemakers, sewing and quilting clubs. . . . When rural people thought about gathering with friends and neighbors, . . .they thought about the school (79).

Earlier generations used schools for political debates, dances, concerts, adult literacy classes, and literary evenings. The local school teacher would organize students and community members to put on holiday "programs," which featured group singing, readings, musical solos, and public addresses including community news. These events were so important to the life of the community that the renewal of a teacher's contract would often depend upon the success of his or her "program" (Gulliford 80). The country schoolhouse played an important role in the lives of rural Americans: it was the institutional center of community life.

Community use of the school building was not limited to the countryside. City residents, too, used their neighborhood schools for a variety of after-hours programs. The one-room local schoolhouse was disappearing from city life by the beginning of the twentieth century, after educational reforms created more centralized, standardized, and bureaucratized school systems (Tyack 28). However, it is a mistake to think that communities stopped using their school buildings when these reforms were instituted and larger, centralized schools became the rule. In fact, some educational reformers encouraged urban communities to use their local schools regularly. One of the leading proponents of this idea was the civic reformer Clarence Perry. Perry believed that cities could reverse the increasing isolation of modern urban life by organizing neighborhoods around community centers located in public elementary schools. At the turn of the century, Perry wrote that the public school ought to be used at all reasonable hours for the recreation and improvement of the people. These ideas were soon put into practice. By 1910 public schools were open in the evenings for programs directed at youth and adults in Boston, New York, Newark, and Cincinnati (Cutler 30). The local schoolhouse of the nineteenth century was nearly as important to the civic life of urban neighborhoods as it was to the residents of rural America.

Despite its long history as a civic meeting place, the school building has moved away from the center of public life in recent decades. The establishment of other public meeting places—like civic centers and large auditoriums—has helped to make community use of the schoolhouse less common. And yet, in spite of the decades-long movement away from using schools as community gathering places, there is today a return to this traditional practice. The desegregation of schools during the 1960s created the opportunity for public educational institutions to become inclusive centers for the entire community. The school now seems to be a natural public space where Americans can meet. More and more often, people are using their local schoolhouses for com-

munity programs. Some schools are used for supplemental programs after the regular school day is done; others are used as neighborhood social service distribution points; still other schools, once vacant, have been refitted for other uses, like alternative housing or full-time community centers. Before turning our attention to four cities that are encouraging community use of school facilities, we will consider some of the positive effects, as well as some of the difficulties, that schools and civic groups can expect to face when schools open their doors after three o'clock.

Alternative Uses for Schools: Benefits and Challenges. Communities find that they reap numerous rewards from opening schools in the evening hours. Both the school and the surrounding community stand to gain from such an arrangement. The major benefit to the community is obvious: local groups get to use a well-maintained, centrally located building at little or no cost. The school, on the other hand, wins something just as important, if less obvious: a chance to improve relations with the community. Schools today need the financial and volunteer assistance of community members more than ever. However, most school systems fail to gain community support because they interact only with those members of the community who have school-age children—even though the percentage of households with school-age children has been shrinking for decades. For example, in a typical American school district, only twenty-five percent of residents have children in school; the remaining seventy-five percent have little or no contact with their local schools (Decker vi). These non-parent residents are less likely to support additional funding for schools if they see no personal benefits from this funding. It is highly ironic that in many communities the non-parent population enters the local schoolhouse only on election day, and then to vote against additional school funding!

However, more and more cities are discovering that this does not have to be the case. School officials can help to strengthen public relations by restoring the school building as a neighborhood meeting place. Once community members are allowed to use the school building and are exposed to the good work being done there, they begin to feel a sense of ownership in the building as a civic institution. This can lead to a situation where a spirit of greater cooperation and involvement replaces one of alienation and even hostility (Decker 19). As we will see in the examples listed below, this trend is evident in cities all around the country.

Although opening the school doors to community groups creates real benefits for both schools and local organizations, complications can arise. First, school officials take on a responsibility to be equitable when they decide to allow outside groups to use school facilities after regular hours. School administrators need to be aware of the legal implications of denying community groups access to public facilities. In some communities, ill-conceived decisions about who gets to use the schoolhouse have become battles over First Amendment rights. Benjamin Sendor notes that the First Amendment does not *require* schools to open their doors to any outsiders. However, when a school does open its doors, he argues:

. . . it triggers the application of the Free Speech Clause principles, the most vital of which is that [school] boards must not discriminate between similarly situated people or groups seeking to use facilities for similar kinds of expression. . . . The difficult trick in applying that rule is determining which kinds of users and uses are legally equivalent (16).

In the interest of respecting the entire community's need for public meeting spaces, school administrators need to set equitable policies for schoolhouse use when they decide to allow outside groups to use their facilities.

Second, communities also face potential difficulties when they set out to reclaim vacant schools for community purposes. Vacant schools can be attractive prospects to private investors. These buildings are usually well-built, spacious, and centrally located. And they're inexpensive: school districts are often glad to get empty school buildings off their hands, and are willing to sell them to investors for a nominal fee. But time is of the essence in informing investors about newly vacant schools. Because fiscally strapped school districts often allocate very little money to maintain vacant buildings, investors are less interested in redeveloping school buildings that have been vacant for more than a year or two. Therefore, timely cooperation among the school district, city planners, and private investors is crucial to creating new uses for vacant school buildings.

The four projects described below illustrate how communities can come together to create effective programming in their local schools. These initiatives renegotiate the relationship between school and community, creating a more inclusive approach to addressing local needs. By undertaking these school-based community programs, Charleston, West Virginia, Utica, New York, Visalia, California, and Waco, Texas are joining other localities in updating the role of the schoolhouse, helping it to serve the needs of its neighbors more effectively.

Charleston, West Virginia: *Centralizing family social services in three elementary schools*

Charleston's plan to install after-hours Family Resource Centers at three area elementary schools reflects a new way of doing business for the area's social service providers. Traditionally, Charleston and surrounding Kanawha County have used a "crisis-oriented" model to guide the delivery of social services. By contrast, the proposed new delivery system is using the school-based Family Resource Centers to encourage prevention, early intervention, and education. The Family Resource Center approach to social service delivery addresses the potential problems of low-income families before they reach the crisis stage.

Programs are designed to provide assistance to low-income families and to strengthen the ability of these families to help themselves. The school-based family centers link existing social service providers, bringing together a range of services including health screenings, literacy counseling, and employment placement.

Elk Elementary is a Kanawha County school chosen to be the site of one of the Charleston area's three Family Resource Centers. The school serves children from the rural areas surrounding Charleston. Elk Elementary's Family Resource Center is an important new dimension in what is already a remarkable community outreach program at the school. Leonard Allen, the principal of Elk Elementary, has heard too many stories about how families in his school district—some living as far away as twenty-five to thirty miles from Charleston—have had to spend entire days moving among social service providers in the city. Social service delivery is further complicated by the fact that Kanawha County has no public transportation system. Mr. Allen hopes that the Family Resource Center in his school will make it easier for isolated families to find the services they need in one location—and without having to make the difficult trip into Charleston.

The existing programs at Elk Elementary merit a closer look, for they provide a remarkable example of what good things happen when schools encourage community use of school facilities. "Our school is only a year old," says Mr. Allen, "and we would like to see that it is used as much as possible." In fact, the community uses Elk Elementary a great deal. Even though classes don't begin until 9:00 a.m., the school building is open at 7:00 a.m. for the "On Deck" program. For one dollar per day, parents can drop their children off at school, where a teacher will take care of them until classes begin. On the other side of the work day, the "Third Base" program takes over. As "the last stop before home," the Third Base program provides care for students between the end of classes and 5:00 p.m., when their parents pick them up on their way home from work. During Third Base hours, teachers and parents tutor students and monitor a variety of recreational activities. Both "On Deck" and "Third Base" are self-sufficient: teachers and parents are paid with the money collected from the parents of participating children. Together, these programs represent a community solution to a problem that all working parents face: the shortage of high-quality day care.

The "Parents as Teachers" (PAT) program is yet another of the local service-providing organizations that are a part of the Family Resource Center network. PAT is an independent organization, funded through a series of grants, but it works in a close partnership with Elk Elementary. "Parents as Teachers" reaches out to parents of children under three years of age who want to learn more about their children's early development. "We've seen kids whom no one has ever worked with coming into kindergarten," says Karolyn Hall, an elementary school counselor who coordinates PAT. Ms.

Hall oversees the work of two "parent educators" who teach parenting skills, both through home visits and during monthly meetings, at the Elk Elementary School. Some of the families these parent educators visit each month live in remote places more than thirty miles away from the agencies in Charleston that distribute the kinds of social services they need. PAT exemplifies yet another way in which Charleston and Kanawha County are breaking down barriers that can separate schools from the surrounding community.

The various community players in the Elk River District's extensive school-based support network seem to have avoided the "turf politics" that plague so many efforts to restructure the role of the local school. Their effort mobilizes the entire community, using the schoolhouse as a forum for combining the various talents of local residents and applying these talents to the problems that the community faces.

Utica, New York:
Revitalizing the neighborhood through a reclaimed schoolhouse

The Utica Free Academy (UFA) building is a good example of what can be done with vacant schools: the high school building sits at the heart of the Cornhill neighborhood as an emblem of that area's decline. But Utica has developed a plan to recycle the former UFA building in a way that responds to the city's changing demographics. Twenty-four percent of Utica's population is over age 60, while the number of young people who live in the city is declining. The city closed UFA in 1990 as part of its plan to consolidate its three high schools in response to these shifting demographics. But Utica has devised a plan to modify this vacant high school for new uses and to revitalize the Cornhill neighborhood in the process. Utica has joined with a local hospital and a geriatric care facility to turn the large, centrally located Utica Free Academy building into a combination adult housing complex, geriatric care facility, and neighborhood center.

The project is working with neighborhood residents to take full advantage of the Cornhill community's many untapped resources. Cornhill's young people are being involved in the project from the very early stages: young men and women are being placed as apprentices to tradespeople working on the conversion of the school. Once this conversion work is completed, the former gymnasium will hold a community center. Three of the programs that will make their home in the new community center—the youth career ladder, the neighborhood block association, and the youth corps—address Cornhill's most pressing needs: insufficient opportunities for youth; lack of grassroots leadership; and diminished community pride. The new community center is also establishing a neighborhood health clinic and a social service distribution site. Even though the Utica Free Academy will not be used for high school classes anymore, it will be restored to the center of community life in Cornhill.

Another former Utica school has recently been converted into affordable housing. The 125-year-old Bleecker Street Elementary School was closed between 1967 and 1992, but recently reopened after having been transformed into 10 one-bedroom apartments by a private non-profit organization. In addition, a new structure adjacent to the former schoolhouse contains thirty-four two-bedroom apartments. Located close to the downtown district, this former school building is in an area of the city that has not been a traditional residential neighborhood. However, bringing new residents into this business district has had a positive impact: local merchants have gained new clients and have begun to spruce up their storefronts. Once filled with pupils, the Bleecker Street School is now completely filled with small families and senior citizens who meet income eligibility levels. Here again, Utica has revitalized a neighborhood by finding new uses for a vacant school building.

Visalia, California:
Portable youth program centers at schools

The use of school property figures prominently in Visalia's plan to address a growing problem that affects the entire community: the proliferation of

youth delinquency in the city. Visalia is attempting to address the underlying tensions that lead to youth violence: tensions that arise during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. America's 20 million young adolescents (ages 9-14) decide for themselves how they will spend at least five hours—or forty percent—of their waking, nonschool hours. They spend half of this discretionary time—twenty percent of their total waking hours—watching television (Carnegie 29). This abundance of unstructured discretionary time presents a significant risk to adolescents (Carnegie 33).

Visalia's plan attempts to add structure to its young people's discretionary time by providing alternatives for after school time. A local coalition plans to establish supplemental program centers in portable modular buildings at four local elementary and middle schools. These program centers are offering a variety of academic, recreational, and counseling activities after school and on weekends. Programs include child care, sports and recreation, family programs, camping programs, and literacy training—all of which are designed to give at-risk young people the skills they will need to make the transition into adulthood.

Visalia plans to make each of its program centers fairly autonomous. The organizers of this initiative recognize that the centers will need flexibility, so that they can tailor their programs to the special needs of the young people who use them. The proposed management structure of these centers reflects this philosophy: each program center is establishing its own advisory board, made up of students, parents, teachers, school principals, volunteers, and YMCA staff members; these boards, in turn, report to an advisory board, which brings together representatives from each program center with officials from the YMCA, city schools, and the police department. Visalia believes that their flexible, inclusive approach will be more successful than a program designed and managed by people less familiar with the specific problems of the young people living in the four targeted neighborhoods. The community hopes that by bringing neighborhood residents together at a centrally located site—the school—they can bring together the untapped talents of the community to help young people have a better chance of personal and academic success.

Waco, Texas:
Lighted Schools

The citizens of Waco are opening their schoolhouses after-hours to address one of the most serious issues facing their community—youth development. Waco has targeted four area middle schools as "Lighted Schools" after the regular school day has finished. The Lighted Schools program brings together a broad cross section of the community to address the special needs of middle school students by providing them with supplemental programming. This program's method is specific and thorough, taking a comprehensive approach to the needs of Waco's young people. Over 450 students per year will attend the privately funded Lighted Schools on a daily basis—from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. weekdays, as well as on weekends and holidays.

"Middle school students are often forgotten," says Catherine Jordan, executive director of the McLennan County Youth Collaboration, the organization administering the Lighted Schools program. "There are many programs directed toward elementary school students and high school students in Waco. However, there are relatively few extracurricular programs set up for students between sixth and eighth grades. And yet these are the ages where our statistics rise dramatically—in terms of teen pregnancy, violence, etc."

With the Lighted Schools initiative, the Waco community has developed four programs to address the needs of young people at this critical age: juvenile delinquency prevention, adolescent health clinics, pre-employment skills training, and cultural enrichment. Putting these strategies into practice demands the talents of a great many local volunteers as well as the services of several groups of area professionals. Volunteer assistance is especially important to the juvenile delinquency prevention programming, while paid professionals will monitor the health, employment skills, and cultural enrichment components. The juvenile delinquency prevention initiative matches each participating middle school student with both a

mentor and an "advocate." Local Baylor University students enrolled in a mentoring class are acting as tutors, counselors, and role models for Lighted School students. In addition, parents, grandparents, and other volunteers are serving at the Lighted Schools as "advocates," or liaisons, linking individual students to social service providers. Finally, each of the four Lighted Schools provides a curriculum to prevent juvenile delinquency and violent behavior in at-risk students.

To address the health needs of middle school students, each Lighted School is installing adolescent health clinics. Area health care providers will staff clinics in each of the four Lighted Schools. The program is contracting with individual health care professionals and an area hospital to treat minor illnesses and to offer physical exams, screenings and referrals. In addition, these professionals are leading health promotion programs for students and their families, emphasizing good nutrition, pregnancy prevention, exercise, smoking cessation, and drug and alcohol abuse prevention. A second group of professionals, from both the Texas Employment Commission and Texas Agriculture Extension Service, is helping to bolster students' pre-employment skills, preparing the middle school students f[illegible] their first jobs. And finally, the local arts community is helping to establish a cultural/creative center in each Lighted School. Artists, arts organizations, museums, and libraries are providing programming in each of the four Lighted Schools at least twice per week. In addition to school-based programming, arts organizations from around the "lighted community" have invited Lighted Schools' students to visit their facilities.

Implementation of the Lighted Schools program has built upon existing collaborations and by using the resources of local volunteers. In essence, the Lighted Schools program brings the existing network of community collaborations into the schoolhouse, streamlining the delivery of social services and focusing attention on a previously neglected segment of the young population. In this way, the entire "lighted community" is involved in addressing the special needs of Waco's middle school students.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

✣ *Many communities are returning to the traditional practice of using local schools as neighborhood gathering places. The appeal of this idea is easy to understand: schools are centrally located, well-maintained and designed to hold large groups of people. Moreover, schools are generally vacant in the evening hours—the time when most community groups hold their meetings.*

✣ *Community use of school facilities can help build neighborhood cohesion. Often a defining physical feature of a neighborhood, schools help to define the community life. When a neighborhood school is vacant, it can have a negative impact on a community's identity. By contrast, school-based community programming can give focus to a neighborhood, creating a renewed sense of civic participation.*

✣ *Opening the school doors to neighborhood groups helps build good school-community relations. Community members appreciate being invited to use the school facilities that their tax dollars support. Inviting nearby residents to use school facilities may make them more likely to give the school volunteer and financial support.*

✣ *Schools often face new challenges when making their facilities available to outside groups. For example, school officials must develop equitable policies for determining which groups can use school facilities.*

✣ *Neighborhood participation in the planning and management of school-based community programming is a key to the success of these initiatives. The most successful school-based community programs seek out local residents to help design and staff their initiatives.*

✣ *School officials themselves are often instrumental in developing school-based community programming. Because these teachers and administrators work with the community's children every day, they are especially aware of the challenges that face local families.*

✣ *Schools are comfortable, non-threatening, and convenient places for children and families to gather. After-hours programming for families can get parents, teachers, and students working together as a team.*

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ISSUES

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